The Children of the Shoe

E. M. JAMESON

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By

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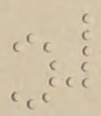

TO

MY LITTLE FRIEND

Sybil Vincent

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The Children of the Shoe

Chapter I

The Prince Who Never Smiled

THE Old Woman was having her annual house-cleaning.

It was an unpleasant time for everybody, as her temper, sharp at the best, was past bearing at this period of the year. And there was really some excuse for her, poor thing, for the children grew more numerous year by year, until the Shoe, capacious as it was, refused to hold any more.

'Some of you must go into the world to earn your own living," said the Old Woman, crossly; and at her words a thrill of excitement ran through the children.

The great brown Shoe stood among beautiful surroundings in the heart of the country, away from towns and houses, in the midst of green, rolling meadows where rabbits frisked in and out of their holes, and bright-eyed squirrels darted among the tree-trunks.

And at last the time had really come when some of them were to set forth in quest of a living.

The Old Woman marshaled them in line with her birch broom. She was tired, and cross, and dusty, and her large frilled cap was all awry; but a tear rolled down her cheek, for, despite her sharp tongue, she loved the children, and did not wish to spare one of them.

"There's no help for it," she said, in a heart-broken voice; "it's what I've been dreading all along; some of you must go, children."

At the sight of her tears the children ceased to fidget, feeling that this was really the most remarkable day in their lives.

The Old Woman glanced up and down the long line of eager faces.

"Rollo must go," she said; "he takes up enough room for two."

Rollo, a tall, ungainly boy, rubbed his head and looked foolish.

"I can't do anything," he said; "they'll laugh at me in the world."

For Rollo was slow and awkward, and the other children laughed at him, but all acknowledged that he was good-natured.

"Everybody's good for something," said the Old Woman, with decision, "and even if you only dig potatoes, you'll have to earn your living. So that's settled; stand out of the ranks."

Then Ivor stood out, his brown eyes very

eager. "I *want* to go into the world," he said. "I'd like to be famous one day, and I can't if I stay in the Shoe!"

Little Merle clasped her hands appealingly. "If Ivor goes, I should like to go," she said; "the Shoe will be so very lonely without him."

The Old Woman stroked Merle's golden hair, and her face was sad as she said, "Go, if you must, dear; even the birds in the nest grow restless when their wings strengthen—go, if you must."

"If Merle goes, I do n't see why *I* should n't go." Aggravina tossed her head disdainfully as she spoke. "I'm tired of the Shoe; I want to go into the world to enjoy myself. Why should n't I have sparkling jewels, and be a fine lady?"

Aggravina was very proud and disagreeable. She had never been known to do a

kind act, and the babies all cried at the mere sight of her.

She tossed her head again. "I hate the Shoe!" she said.

The face of the Old Woman grew very sorrowful.

"Perhaps in years to come you may be glad to return to the Shoe, Aggravina. Go, if you must; the world will tame your proud spirit, and make your manners humbler."

But Aggravina only tossed her long, dark hair from her face. She thought she knew better than her elders.

Then a little piping voice near the Old Woman's elbow said, "Oh, please, I'd like to go, too."

There was an exclamation from everybody.

"No, no, darling," said the Old Woman, pressing Gyp to her side as she spoke; "the

rough world is not for such as you—home is best."

But little Gyp only shook his golden curls from his eyes and laughed merrily, hobbling away on his little crutches, for he was a cripple.

Then he hobbled back again, and slipped his fingers into the Old Woman's hand coaxingly. His eyes were like bits of the blue sky, bright and unshadowed as the sea on a summer day.

He was very tiny, with a small, white, peaked face that, despite his brave spirit, never quite lost its look of patient endurance. By reason of his helplessness he was the most dearly loved of all the children, and tears filled the eyes of the Old Woman as she looked at him.

"We will take care of him," said Rollo and Ivor and Merle.

"Children," said the Old Woman, in a very grave voice, "you do not understand. You must all take different paths into that world where Providence watches over little children."

The faces of the children grew serious. They had expected to journey through the world together. To go alone, to have no Shoe to shelter in at night—this thought made them pause for a moment.

"Those who like may stay," said the Old Woman.

"We will go," said the children in one breath.

And it was settled that Ivor, the one who of them all was most eager to go, should start on his travels first.

The Old Woman gave him an alpenstock to help him up and down the rugged sides of the mountains, a little satchel containing

food, and a pair of shoes to sling across his shoulders, in case the shoes he wore should wear into holes. "For the road up the mountain is steep and rugged," she said, "and you may be glad to have a new pair before you reach the world."

Then, last of all, she gave him a silver coin.

"Make the best use of it," she said; "do not spend it unless your need is very urgent. It is a lucky coin—take care of it."

It was at dawn of day that Ivor started on his travels, just as a faint rosy light began to tip the gleaming snow-caps of the mountains, and the birds in the nests to twitter a greeting to the newly-awakened day.

The children watched him mounting the road higher and higher, until he reached the summit of the mountain and stood outlined against the clear, rose-colored sky.


Last of all she gave him
a silver coin
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The next moment he was lost from view. The mountain side was very steep and rugged.

Ivor's heart sank as he looked down. But beneath lay a pleasant green valley, and from a distance came the faint tinkle of bells. So he took courage, and went on his way valiantly.

Presently the sound of the bells came nearer, first from one direction and then from another, until the air was full of their chime; and then a number of goats appeared in view. And, following them, came a little goatherd, in a faded red skirt, her feet brown and bare, her hair in a tangle round her face and her brown, astonished eyes, for she had not expected to see Ivor.

"Have you lost your way?" she asked.

Ivor missed the other children, so he was very glad to see the little goatherd after such

a solitary day, and her clear, brown eyes looked very friendly.

"I am going into the world to seek my fortune," he said; "perhaps you can direct me. I suppose it lies yonder?"

He pointed to the valley that lay below, with red peaked roofs showing between the tree-tops.

"The world is a great place," said the little goatherd, shading her eyes with her hand as she, too, looked into the sunny valley. "I have heard my grandmother say this is only a little bit of it. There's a great town beyond the valley, where the King lives, and on a very clear day you can see the towers of his palace from the top of the mountain."

"Oh! I should like to see them," exclaimed Ivor, eagerly; "perhaps we could to-day."

"But it is to be seen from a place so steep that only my goats and I can reach it," said the little goatherd. "My grandmother told me she saw it once when she was tending the goats."

"What did she see?" asked Ivor, and so eager was he that he would have lost his foothold had not the little goatherd pulled him away from the edge of the rocks. Then she told him of the turrets of the palace, towers of gleaming ivory with slender points of gold tapering to the sky, and of the rare and priceless treasures they contained.

"The King must be very happy," said Ivor.

"But he is not, indeed," said the little goatherd. "My grandmother told me the other day that he is the saddest man in all his kingdom—so she has heard."

"Why is he so sad?" asked Ivor, curiously.

"He has only one child," replied the little goatherd, "and he has never been known to smile. They have tried everything imaginable, my grandmother says, but without avail. And now the doctors say that unless he can be made to smile, and to take an interest in things around him, the little Prince will die. The King had offered rich rewards to the one who will win a smile from the heir to the throne, and numbers have tried, but not one has succeeded. Then the King gets so disappointed and angry that he shuts them up in the dungeons under the palace; and now nobody tries, for fear of meeting with such a fate."

"I should like to go to that part of the world," said Ivor; "there must be beautiful things to see, and work to be found."

So he presently said good-bye to the little goatherd, and, following her directions, found

himself, after many hours of toilsome walking, near the entrance to the town.

It was guarded by a great gate of ivory and gold, with turrets on either side in which stood sentries armed with long spears, while at the gateway stood a soldier of the King's guard in gilt armor. So tall was this warrior, that Ivor had to crane his neck to look up at him.

"I am come to make the Prince smile," said Ivor, boldly, when he was asked his business, for he had formed many plans on his way.

The tall guardsman roared with laughter at the idea, and all the soldiers round about joined in the mirth, until Ivor wished he could hide from sight.

Even as they laughed, a chariot drawn by four beautiful gray horses whirled rapidly up to the gateway. There was silence but for

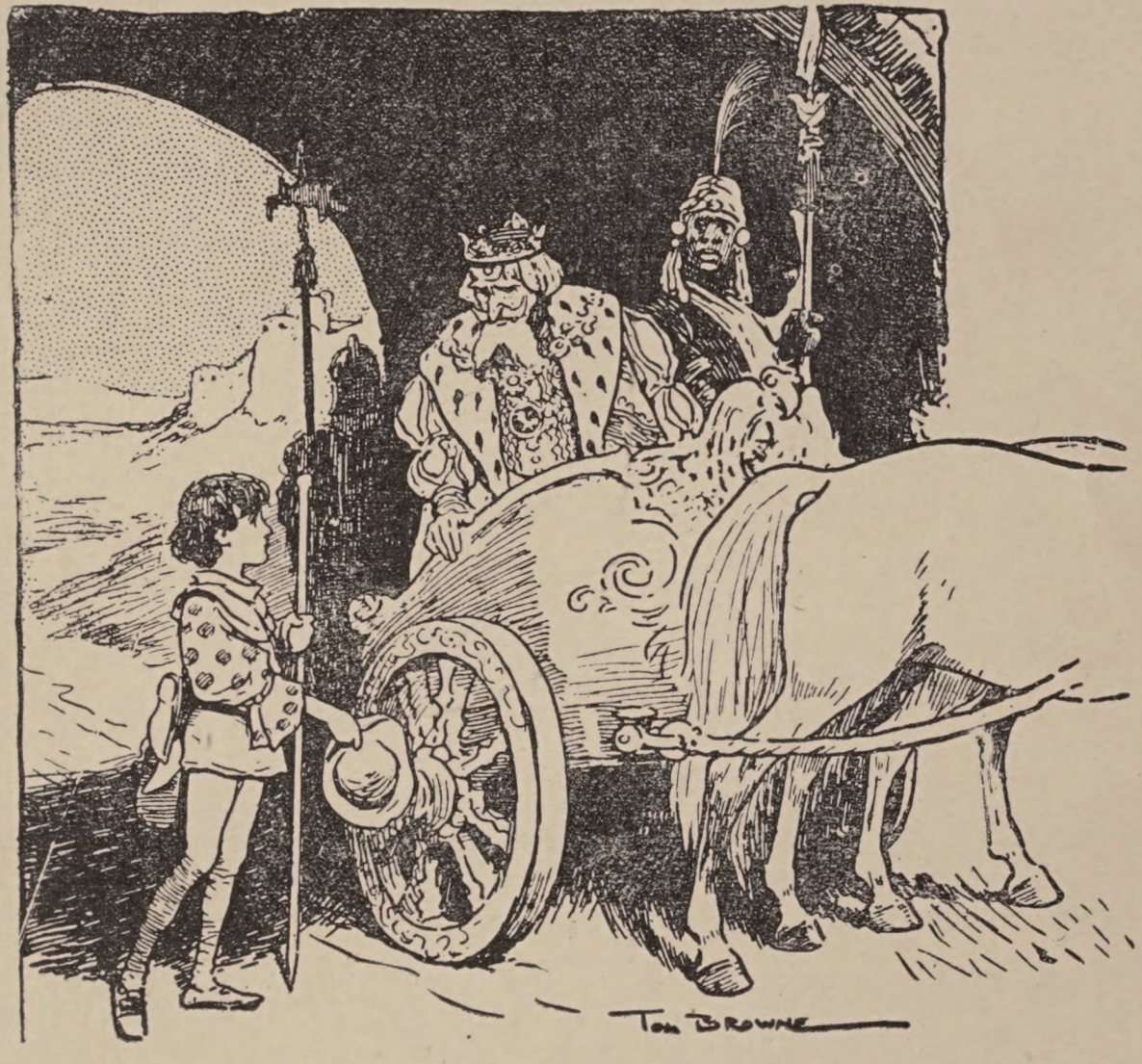
the ringing of weapons as the sentinels presented arms.

'The King!" Ivor heard some one say in a low voice, and then he took his little cap from his head and bowed low, not daring to look up.

Now, when the King heard laughter it made him very sad, for he thought of his little son at home who never smiled.

'What means this noise?" he asked, and his voice was so stern that Ivor's knees trembled with fear. Then he heard the captain of the guard humbly explain the cause of the mirth—a little boy had the audacity to say that he had come to make His Royal Highness smile.

But the King did not smile. He leaned out of his chariot, and Ivor, looking up timidly, saw that the King was beckoning to him to draw nearer. Cap in hand, he obeyed.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The King's eyes were kind, if his face was stern. "Do you know the penalty of failure, boy?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Ivor, his clear, brown eyes meeting the King's without shrinking.

The King drew a long breath. He supposed it would mean another disappointment; but he liked Ivor's face, and had only mentioned the penalty to try his courage, for he did not put children in the dungeons—indeed, no child had offered hitherto to make the Prince smile. Only that morning the great physicians had told him that in a day or two the heir to the throne must die, so thin and weak had he become, and so listless amidst his beautiful surroundings.

"Get in beside me," he said to Ivor, and as they drove rapidly on he questioned the boy as to how he was going to make the

Prince smile. Ivor shamefacedly drew from his pocket a horn-handled knife with one little shabby, worn blade, and from the other pocket a small block of wood.

"What has that rubbish to do with the Prince?" asked the King, harshly, feeling more disappointed than he cared to own.

Tears came into Ivor's eyes.

"I can carve funny things," he said; "and, Your Majesty, they used to make the babies in the Shoe laugh, so as I came down the mountain I thought that the Prince might smile too."

The King sighed impatiently. "You can try," he said; and the next moment they drew up at the palace entrance.

The King hurried Ivor through the rows of amazed courtiers and retainers, up the marble staircase, and into the great nursery where the Prince lay, surrounded by a hun-

dred beautiful objects, in which he took no interest.

"Leave us," said the King; and the attendants withdrew, one by one, until none remained save the King, Ivor, and the thin, pale-faced little Prince on his pile of silken cushions.

The King bent down and very tenderly took his little son in his arms; but though the Prince stretched out his wasted hands, he never smiled. Then the King sat down with the Prince on his knee, and Ivor began to chip the block of wood with the shabby little knife-blade.

As the bits of wood flew round, the little Prince tried to catch them, and the King watched the pale face intently. Faster and faster flew the chips, and by degrees a funny little gnome's face grew out of the block of wood, a fantastic little creature with startling

eyes and grotesque expression. Ivor was very clever with his fingers. Even the King could not repress a smile; but though the little Prince drew nearer, and his face grew interested, he did not smile. But the King grew more hopeful.

"Carve something funnier still, boy," he commanded.

And Ivor, eager too, chipped away until the knife-blade glinted like lightning, and the bits of wood flew in a shower over the little Prince's clothes and hair. He stirred in his father's arms; and then, under Ivor's clever fingers, the block of wood took the shape of a dog's head with sharp ears and pointed nose. The little Prince pointed with his finger, and a smile broke over his face.

"It's Max," he said, and he laughed outright, for Max was his own dog, and Ivor's dog resembled it. And at that moment Max


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ran into the room, and the little Prince laughed again, and patted his soft, fawn-colored head.

The news spread like wild-fire through the palace. The physicians hastened into the Royal nursery, and the little Prince smiled at them. Into every highway and byway the news spread, until the palace was besieged by those who wished to see the little boy who had saved the heir to the throne.

And the King appeared at the window of the great banqueting hall with the heir-apparent in his arms and Ivor at his side. And all the populace shouted themselves hoarse, the bells rang, and the citizens feasted, while hour by hour the little Prince grew stronger. His favorite toy was the carving of the dog's head; and in after years it was shown among the town's chief curiosities as the thing that saved a king's life.

The prisoners, of course, were liberated, and so well rewarded that they forgot their misery in the dungeons.

Ivor's shabby little knife, the founder of his fortunes, was put into the great museum, and people came from miles around to see it, and the boy who used it to such good purpose.

Ivor was a sensible lad, whose prosperity did not spoil him. In later years he became one of the greatest sculptors of the age, and his children, and the King's children, never tired of hearing the story of the Prince who never smiled.

Chapter II

The Imitation Princess

WHEN Aggravina left the Shoe, no one sorrowed for her.

Indeed, so disagreeable was she that everybody, down to the babies, rejoiced to see her disappearing over the crest of the mountain.

And Aggravina, on her side, did not feel any grief. She did not shed a tear. She thought the world must be a place full of enjoyment, where she could do exactly as she liked—a place where fine clothes and jewels were to be had for the asking—which shows how very little she knew about the world.

She was in such a hurry to be gone that

she forgot to take with her the little satchel of food which had been placed ready for her.

She would have no new shoes. By the time her own were worn out, she would have others far finer; and, as for an alpenstock, *she* had never needed a stick to help her along!

So she took her foolish, headstrong way up the mountain, and long before she reached the top she wished for the alpenstock.

The path was strewn with sharp stones which cut her feet, and made her hobble along like a very aged woman.

There were no trees along that side of the mountain, so that no shade of any kind hid the fierce rays of the sun from her.

As the day wore on she sought in vain for shelter. She was hungry now and miserable, and in a *very, very* bad temper. She even wished to return to the Shoe; but when she tried to retrace her steps she found, after

wandering up and down the mountain side, that she had lost her way and could not return, even though she wished to do so.

Her throat was parched, there was no stream of water to be seen, and no berries grew upon the stunted bushes that straggled in and out of the rocky sides of the mountain.

Aggravina sat down and cried bitterly.

A movement in the undergrowth startled her, and she raised her head. An animal like a hyena was slinking past, snarling and showing his teeth. Aggravina did the most foolish thing possible. With a loud cry she sprang to her feet and ran on, on, on, with the hyena after her. She could hear the soft pad of his feet coming closer and closer.

On she stumbled, on and on, half falling, then rising again, until she could feel the animal's hot breath upon her neck.

How she longed for the safety of the Shoe!

How willingly would she have rocked the most troublesome baby for hours, could she only have reached home safely!

There was a dark fissure in the side of the rock, and into it she ran, and fell in a breathless heap on the floor of the cave. It was illumined by a faint red light, and she heard a voice say, "Oh, my poor head! What is that noise?"

And Aggravina was so delighted to hear a voice once again that she rose and flung herself upon the speaker without pausing a moment to think.

"Save me! Save me!" she cried.

"What a fuss, to be sure!" said the old woman, who was really a witch. "It's only Binkie's fun, is n't it, Binkie?" And, to Aggravina's terror, the hyena slunk across the floor of the cave, showing his teeth and

red tongue in a terrible kind of smile. Aggravina clung still closer.

"You'll choke me," said the old woman. "Go away. Oh, my poor head!"

She shook herself free from Aggravina, and when the latter saw her she wondered how she could ever have found courage to put her arms round such a terrible creature. She was very dirty and ragged, with eyes as fierce and red as Binkie's.

The old woman patted the hyena lovingly.

"Binkie's my pet," she said; "and it's not often he is able to hunt little girls on the mountain, is it, Binkie?" And the hyena gave a low snarl in reply.

They were such a terrible pair that Aggravina heartily wished herself miles away from them, and began to form plans for escape.

But every time she stirred, Binkie pointed his ears, and his red, hungry eyes never left her face. After a time she grew accustomed to the dim light and could distinguish objects around her. A faint, red glow came from the middle of the cave, where a fire burned. The smoke rose in great wreaths to the roof and then, unable to find an exit, descended again and went out at the opening to the cave.

It caused Aggravina's eyes to smart and irritated her throat, making her cough. Over the embers hung a round iron pot, out of which came a smell of cooking which made Aggravina feel very hungry, indeed.

The old witch went up to it and stirred it round and round with a stick, then peered into it, and shook her head.

"Too thin," she said, half aloud, "far too thin. Must get a few more before supper

time. Are you hungry?" she asked, turning suddenly to Aggravina.

"Yes, please," replied Aggravina, who was too frightened to be as rude as usual. "Perhaps you'll let me have some supper with you?"

"It's folks' business to wait till they're asked," replied the witch; "or so I've been told. Shall we give her some supper, Binkie?"

The hyena showed his teeth in a snarl, looking as if he would have liked Aggravina for *his* supper.

"Before you have your supper you must earn it," said the witch, taking a great thorn stick from a distant corner and placing on her head a huge hat, like a mushroom, which made her look even worse than before. "We have to find ours, and I do n't see why you should get yours for nothing. Binkie knows

where to find plenty of fine fat frogs. Do n't you, Binkie?"

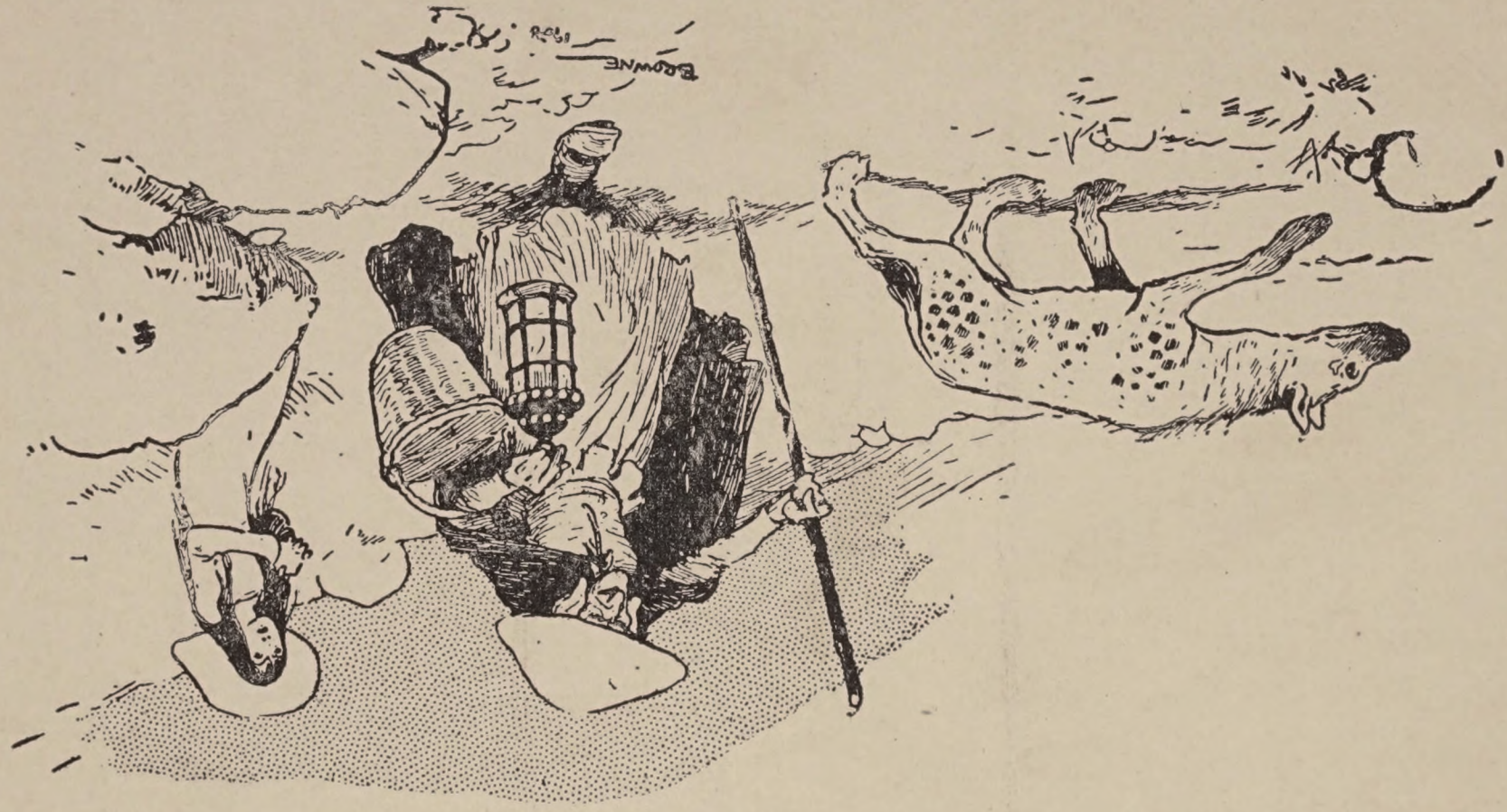
Aggravina's heart sank. She did not at first comprehend that the supper dish was to consist of stewed frogs; but such was the case.

She reluctantly followed the witch down the side of the mountain, guided by the light of a big lantern, carried by her hostess.

Whenever Binkie stopped at a large stone and turned it over cleverly with his nose and paws, there were sure to be three or four fat frogs, which the old woman put into a covered basket on her arm.

"Run after them and catch them!" she shouted to Aggravina. "If you do n't work you shan't have a morsel of supper."

But Aggravina let the creatures hop away —she did not want a supper of stewed frogs. Her knees shook with fear as she followed



the witch and her strange companion; her one thought was how to escape them.

The witch gathered a few herbs, and they retraced their steps to the cave.

Aggravina was terrified lest they should force her to eat some of the frog stew, and just as the entrance to the cave came in sight, and the hyena had run on, anxious for his supper, she turned and flew along the path and down the steep side of the mountain. On she went, careless of danger, only anxious to be rid of her terrible friends. Then she realized that Binkie was following her.

The pad, pad of his feet sounded distinctly, and she knew that there was no hope of escape.

He was close behind her; she gave one frightened leap forward and felt herself falling, falling, falling into space, until her brain whirled dizzily and she remembered no more.

It was daylight when she awoke. She could not at first remember where she was, or what had happened. It was dawn, and the birds were singing in chorus, while all the young birds were learning to fly.

She was lying upon a strip of soft green turf, and beside her flowed a stream in which the creamy cups of water-lilies unfolded in the sun.

As she raised herself on one elbow, she saw the mountain looming far above her—and then she remembered what had happened. Even to return to the Shoe she dare not face the terrors of the witch's cave.

She was faint with hunger. The fragrance of wild strawberries scented the air. Upon the bushes beside her she saw some beautiful red berries. She gathered some, and they were quite unlike anything she had ever tasted before.

Hardly had she eaten half a dozen than she began to feel drowsy. Little by little her eyes closed. She tried to rouse herself; then her head fell back, and she was fast asleep, with her head pillowed on her arm.

As she slept she dreamed. She thought some one came to her and asked her if she would like to be a princess for a day, and wear fine clothes and dazzling jewels.

In her dream she assented eagerly, for this was what she had hoped for when she left the Shoe.

Then a voice said, "Wake up, wake up, and you shall be a princess for one whole day!"

And the next moment Aggravina rubbed her sleepy eyes, and, when she opened them, she thought she must still be dreaming.

Seated on a tree-trunk near her was a real Princess. There could be no doubt about

her reality, for none but princesses wore such dazzling apparel.

This Princess was no older than Aggravina; but, oh! the beauty of her dress!

It was of palest blue gauze, painted with sprays of blush roses. Jewels sparkled in her hair, on her frock, and even in the buckles of her dainty shoes. But they were only like dewdrops shining in the dawn ere the sun disperses them.

The brown eyes of the Princess sparkled, too.

She approached Aggravina, tripping daintily across the grass in her high-heeled shoes, her finger on her lip to command silence. There was a naughty, mischievous air about her that made Aggravina wonder, and she wore a little head-dress of gold filigree and diamonds from which Aggravina could not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remove her eyes. The Princess looked too dainty for anything but a glass case.

"Little girl," she said in a whisper, "would you like to be a princess?"

Aggravina nodded. She had no idea how princesses should be treated, but she rose slowly to her feet.

"You *would?*" asked the Princess, eagerly, "*really and truly?* Oh, you do n't know how very dull it is, or you would n't say yes! Princesses can't do anything they like—they always have to be careful of their clothes, they're never left alone, and they never have half enough children to play with, because there are so few grand enough." She looked at Aggravina disbelievingly; but the latter nodded again. She thought it must be the finest thing in the world to be a princess.

"Yes, I'd like to be a real princess," she

said, slowly, "and wear fine clothes, and drive in a coach and six."

The little Princess clapped her hands.

"You shall change places with me," she said, gleefully; "only"—as a thought occurred to her—"you can't be a real princess, after all—you can only be an imitation one."

And she began to unfasten her filigree head-dress.

"I got so tired of being a princess," she said, "that I ran away. You must be very quick indeed, for they will all be sent in search of me, and when they come you must be the Princess, and I'll be you—just an ordinary girl who can play with anybody all day."

Then, with deft fingers, she arranged Aggravina's hair under the filigree head-dress, and they exchanged raiment.

The Princess broke into peals of laughter when they stood facing one another, and she looked down at Aggravina's shabby shoes on her own feet.

"What fun it is!" she exclaimed. "I *am* so glad I ran away. You look very like a real princess, and they are all too stupid to know the difference."

Fine feathers make fine birds; the likeness between the two children was remarkable.

Aggravina began to feel very proud and haughty in her fine clothes, and thought, indeed, that she was far more dignified than the real Princess, and that the position was likely to suit her marvelously well.

"I'll be your lady-in-waiting," said the real Princess, with another peal of laughter. "You must put this veil a little bit over your face, so."

She drew out a gauzy film of lace and put it over Aggravina's head.

"Now they may come as soon as ever they like," she said, capering about in her excitement. "Oh, how clumsy your shoes do feel! How *can* you wear them always?"

To Aggravina her own shabby shoes were far more comfortable than the high-heeled shoes of the Princess, but she would not have acknowledged the fact for the world. She walked to and fro, waving a fan with great dignity.

The Princess laughed merrily as she watched her. Aggravina put on many more airs than the real Princess, whose attendants at Court had always grieved for her lack of dignity.

At that moment a sound of bugles was borne upon the breeze, accompanied by the

galloping of steeds and the jingle of accouterments.

The real Princess peeped from behind the bushes and put her finger to her lip.

"Here they are," she whispered, "all the lords-in-waiting, looking so cross, followed by the King's guard."

On they came, their scarlet and gold flashing in the sun, the horses champing their bits impatiently, the huntsmen blowing upon their horns.

And the naughty Princess stood half hidden by the bushes, and laughed to see the fuss that was made.

As the foremost rider caught sight of Aggravina he reined in his horse and, removing his plumed cap, bowed low.

"Oh, Your Highness, what a search we have had for you," he said; "His Majesty,

your grandfather, is greatly distressed at your absence."

He beckoned to a serving-man, who rode forward, leading the most beautiful little white horse, with blue and silver trappings.

Aggravina had never mounted a horse in her life, and when she did so now she mounted with such clumsiness that the real Princess could hardly restrain her laughter.

The gentleman-in-waiting caught sight of her and waved her back.

"Go away, little girl," he said, never dreaming that he was speaking to the heiress-apparent; "go away."

"But the Princess says I am to be her lady-in-waiting," says the real Princess.

At that a roar of laughter went up from the crowd.

Aggravina thought the Princess would be useful in telling her what to do at the palace,

so she commanded that the beggar girl should be allowed to go to the Court.

The real Princess had to spring up behind one of the grooms and hold on to his leather belt.

And in this fashion they returned to the palace. The King was very old. He tottered out to receive his granddaughter, and led her into the throne-room. No one had found out the mistake so far, but at the foot of the throne, on a scarlet velvet cushion, lay the Princess Rosabella's little dog.

He rose as Aggravina approached, and uttered a low growl. *He* knew better. Then he ran down the room at full speed, straight to where the real Princess stood peeping in at the door, and caressed her lovingly.

And then she was ordered to go to the kitchen to wash dishes all the day.

And in the palace everybody made much

of the imitation Princess. Aggravina found it very pleasant for a time. She grew haughty, treating those around her contemptuously, until they said the Princess Rosabella was greatly changed, and that her added dignity was not such a gain, after all. And below stairs the foolish little real Princess grew red-eyed with shedding many tears, and repented greatly of her folly.

One day the real Princess escaped from the kitchens and ran forward and knelt at the old King's feet. She loved her grandfather very dearly.

"Your Majesty," she said, stretching out her hands appealingly, "I am the real Princess Rosabella; this is only an imitation one." Aggravina looked at her as if she had never seen her before.

"She is mad, Your Majesty, and should be locked up," she said.

And the poor little real Princess was taken away and locked up as if she were mad.

But the King felt troubled.

He sent a mounted messenger into the adjoining kingdom with a letter for his youngest daughter, who had married the King, and who was very fond of her niece, the Princess Rosabella.

She was a very clever Queen, and she hastened to ride back with the messenger.

'It is indeed a strange story," she said. "I will see Rosabella and question her."

Now the Queen loved music, and the Princess Rosabella could sing like a lark and play the guitar most beautifully. She had always been delighted to play to her aunt. But when asked to do so this evening Aggravina refused, and, of course, for the very good reason that she could not sing.

The Queen grew angry, and, as a thought

struck her, she looked at Aggravina searchingly, and then turned to the King.

"Perhaps the impostor can sing to us," she said; "the little beggar maid. Let her be sent for, Your Majesty."

She came, so changed and sad that no one could have recognized the merry heiress-apparent. She never said a word to her aunt, thinking that she, like the rest, would only disbelieve her.

But her little dog crept up to her and licked her hand.

"Can you sing, little girl?" asked the Queen, kindly.

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied the real Princess.

'Then sing to us," said the Queen.

And without further bidding Rosabella took a guitar that lay near and sang a song that had been composed expressly for the


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heiress-apparent—a song no one else was allowed to sing.

There was a great hubbub and noise; the real Princess wept happy tears this time, and confessed her folly to her grandfather and the whole Court.

Meantime Aggravina slipped away; but, as she paused at the top of the long flight of marble steps, the little pages-in-waiting who had followed her gave chase. She was brought back, in her rich and borrowed attire, to the throne-room, where she shrank from the gaze of so many condemning glances.

There was no harm, the King told her, in dressing up for fun, but she had been untruthful, and very cruel to the real Princess. She must leave the kingdom at once.

When Aggravina thought of the terrors of the mountain she fell on her knees and begged for mercy. But the King was very stern.

Then the little Princess felt sorry for Aggravina, and asked the King to forgive her.

"It was really my fault," she said, taking the King's hand. "And then, of course, she liked being a princess so much that she could n't bear to give it up. She lives far on the other side of the mountain, Your Majesty, and is afraid to go home alone."

And Aggravina sobbed this time with sorrow for her deceit. She said she would like to return to the Shoe, but was afraid of the terrors of the mountain.

So the Princess Rosabella gave her many presents, and clothes suitable for her station, and sent her across the mountain with an escort of the King's guard, who were bidden to treat Aggravina very kindly.

At first nobody was glad to see Aggravina; but so changed and humble had she become

that in time all the babies loved her, and the Old Woman found her a real comfort. In later years, when Aggravina left home for the second time to seek her fortune in the world, she found it, and lived happily ever after. But not as an imitation Princess.

Chapter III

The Golden Treasure

WHEN little Merle was born, all the birds in the surrounding woods came to the christening, for the Queen of the nightingales became her godmother.

"She is one of ourselves," said the feathered songsters, "and little Merle shall have the gift of song. She shall sing from babyhood, and when she goes into the world her sweet notes shall win love for her wherever she goes."

And they were as good as their word. Before Merle had left the cradle the birds would come and sing to her, and she learned their notes before she could talk.

Many and many a time she would be missing from the Shoe, and they would find her in the leafy recesses of the wood, surrounded by hundreds of her feathered friends.

And as she grew her gift increased in power, until even the nightingales were proud of her.

So that when Merle went into the world she was very poor in money, but she possessed a gift that no money can buy.

"Wherever you go, your song will make friends for you," said her godmother, the nightingale Queen, who was perched upon a bough, surrounded by her court.

Merle stood with her hands behind her back, looking up at her godmother. Her blue eyes were very serious and intent, for her godmother liked to be treated with great respect.

"Yes, godmother," she said.

"And you must not keep your songs only

for the rich and great," said the nightingale Queen. "The poor have few joys, and I dare say you can do much good by your gift."

"Yes," said Merle for the second time.

"On your way through the world the feathered tribe will help and protect you," said the nightingale, pruning her feathers; "but there is one exception, and that is my husband's second cousin, Claribella. She has never forgiven me for excelling her in song. I am the only one that has ever done so, for she has a marvelous voice. She will try to injure you because you are my goddaughter, so beware of her."

She spoke so solemnly that Merle felt a thrill of fear.

"But how shall I know her?" she asked.

"She is a little, insignificant thing," said the Queen, pluming herself with dignity, "not in the least like me. You will know her by a

small tuft of white feathers on her breast. She sings in the wood near the palace, and the King and his courtiers go out on the terrace every night and listen to her. Her notes are so exquisite that no one could imagine her capable of an ill deed. Now, goodbye, little Merle, and take care of your golden treasure; may it bring you good fortune." For that was what the nightingales called Merle's voice.

The birds flew off, led by the Queen, and Merle began her journey.

She had a satchel of food, an alpenstock, and the silver coin, which she was only to make the best use of, while she carried a new pair of shoes in case her own wore out.

They missed Merle in the Shoe, and the babies cried in chorus for a week, because she was not there to sing their good-night lullabies.

Merle passed in safety across the mountain. The birds were her friends whenever she needed them, and their kindness relieved the solitude of the journey.

After a time she drew near to the outskirts of a large town. Her shoes were very thin, but she had not yet been forced to replace them with the new pair. There seemed such numbers of people walking in the streets that Merle felt afraid, and she sat down under a tree by the wayside and ate her last portion of food.

It was such a very small portion that she did not feel much the better for it. She had hardly finished the last morsel when the sound of sobs struck upon her ear. She looked up and down and round about her, but there was no sign of anybody. The sobs seemed to come from behind her, and when she walked

round the tree she saw a little beggar girl seated on the ground, crying bitterly.

She was so thin and in such rags that Merle's heart ached for her.

"What is the matter?" she asked, bending over her.

The child ceased her sobs and smiled through her tears, touching with a wondering finger Merle's long, golden hair as it fell around her.

It reached below her knees in a dazzling, golden shower, but Merle had never learned that it was so wonderful, and she did not understand until the little beggar girl spoke her admiration aloud.

"You must be a princess," she said; "none but princesses have hair like this."

Merle laughed merrily. "I am only a little beggar girl myself," she replied; "at

least I have only one coin, and I have come into the world to earn my living. But what are you so unhappy about?"

Tears rolled down the cheeks of the little beggar girl.

"I was so hungry," she said, "and I saw you eating your bread and butter, and it made the pain worse. So I ran here, where I could n't see you until you had finished."

Merle felt very distressed.

"Oh, why did I eat it all up?" she said; "there is n't a crumb left. But—"

She paused a moment to think. There could be no better use for her money than to spend some of it on buying food for such a hungry child, and yet it was all she had. The next moment she felt ashamed of her hesitation.

"Come into the town and I will get you something to eat," she said.

Then she saw that the feet of the little beggar girl were bruised and bare.

"Put on these nice soft shoes," she said, "and then we will go more quickly."

The little beggar girl had never worn a pair of shoes in her life, and she could hardly take her eyes away from them. They were very large for her, it is true, but so soft—and they protected her feet from the stones.

Then she and Merle went into the town hand in hand, and everybody turned to look at them, for they were a strangely assorted pair.

The little, shivering beggar girl only reached to Merle's shoulder, while Merle was slim and upright, and, if her clothes were shabby, her hair was like a shower of gold and her blue eyes as bright as sapphires. No one noticed her shabby clothes and worn little shoes.

"It is a princess come to town in disguise," they said, and they jostled one another to get a better view, and the butcher-boys climbed the lamp-posts and cheered as if it had been Lord Mayor's Day.

Merle did not understand what the crowd meant, but she was very glad when they came to a baker's shop. But the crowd collected outside and peeped in at the door and windows.

Just then the King rode by on his favorite horse, a beautiful bay with a white star upon her forehead.

He reined in his steed and beckoned to his equerry.

"What is the meaning of the crowd?" he demanded. "Is there bad news from our ships of war—and we have not been warned?"

A little butcher-boy on a lamp-post near


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held on with one hand while he respectfully pulled his front lock with the other.

"Please, Your Majesty," he said, "it's a princess in disguise come to town."

The King frowned, thinking the boy meant to joke with him, and the butcher-boy was so terrified at the frown that he slid down the lamp-post and ran off at full speed. Then the King beckoned to a policeman, who had forgotten his duties and was peeping with the rest.

"Please, Your Majesty, it is a princess in disguise come to town," he said, on being questioned. And the King grew angry.

He went about in disguise himself sometimes, but he did not at all approve of princesses doing so.

Just then the equerry, who had been to the shop to make inquiries, came back to the King.

"All I can hear, Your Majesty, is that a princess has come to town in disguise," he said, "and went into the shop to purchase food. She was so terrified by the crowd that the baker's wife took pity on her and let her and her companion out by the back door, and no one knows where they have gone. But in her haste the disguised princess caught a lock of her hair in the door, and the baker's wife had to set her free by cutting the hair, and here it is, Your Majesty."

And he drew forth a tress of golden hair that shone radiantly in the sunshine.

The King looked at it for a long time in silence. Then he drew his sword and cut a fluttering ribbon from his doublet, and with it fastened the golden lock to his cap, while the crowd looked on and wished to cheer, but dared not.

Then the King rode slowly away towards the palace.

The next day a proclamation was sent forth, saying that a handsome reward would be given to anybody who discovered the disguised princess. But weeks passed by, and no one gained the reward.

Now just about this time the King of the neighboring country sent an ambassador with secret dispatches to the young King, intimating that it was quite time he thought of getting married, and that he himself had five daughters of a marriageable age, and that he was sending them under an escort the following day with their great-aunt to chaperon them.

"Make inquiries," said the young King, smoothing, as he spoke, between his fingers the lock of golden hair, "and if one of the five

princesses has golden hair, I will see her. If not, all five may return with their great-aunt. My queen must have such hair as this."

But the ambassador was obliged to own that not one of the princesses had golden hair. Two had brown, two black, and the youngest red hair. So the five princesses returned to their father without being even seen by the young King, and so furious was the old King at this discourtesy that war appeared to be imminent between the two countries.

But matters were smoothed over, and in time the five princesses found suitable husbands.

The young King grew gloomy as days passed by and the golden-haired princess still remained hidden.

His one solace was to listen to the nightingale singing in the wood beneath the terrace.

One day a strange rumor passed through

the palace. Whether it had its origin in hall or kitchen, no one could say, but a whisper went round reporting that another nightingale had been heard in the city, whose notes far surpassed those of the bird in the wood beneath the terrace. And after a time the whisper reached the King.

"Where is this bird to be found?" he demanded, disbelievingly; and no one could tell him.

The notes had been heard in the very heart of the city, where the houses were so close together that the projecting roofs almost touched one another.

The King laughed scornfully. He had always been accustomed to possess the best of everything, and he did not believe that a bird could be found to surpass the royal nightingale.

"What nightingale would sing her sweet-

est in the heart of a town?" he asked; "and where are notes to be heard more liquid and sweet than these?"

For he was leaning over the balustrade of the terrace, accompanied by his favorite equerry, and Claribella was warbling her very best in the wood beneath.

"True, Your Majesty," agreed the equerry; but he spoke absently, as if his heart was not in his words. Then, with a sudden impulse, he turned to his moody sovereign, wishing to rouse him from his melancholy.

"Yet I heard a marvelous bird but last night, Your Majesty, and I could not trace whence it came. The notes flowed so liquid and pure that I paused, entranced."

The King raised himself from his stooping posture, and his face grew interested.

"Where were you when you heard the sounds?" he asked.


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"In the very heart of the city, Your Majesty. I was taking a short cut through the narrow streets that wind in between the ancient gabled houses that Your Majesty thinks should be pulled down. From which of the houses the sound came I can not tell, for the notes thrilled far above me and seemed to reach the very clouds."

The King threw his cloak around his shoulders and put on a large slouched hat, so that no one meeting him should know he was the King.

"Let us go to these same gabled houses," he said; "perchance the bird may sing tonight. We would learn for ourselves the truth of the matter."

They passed quickly through the town. The streets were for the most part deserted, for the townsfolk were at their evening meal, and the children had gone to bed long before.

No one recognized them as they strode along, and presently they reached the gabled houses in the very heart of the city.

The moon was shining full upon one little peaked window, in which a light shone dimly. The rest was all in darkness.

The attention of the King was caught by the little glimmer of light so near the sky, and he folded his arms and leaned against the opposite wall, looking up at it intently.

No sound broke the stillness of the night for a time; then they heard a faint trill like the awakening notes of birds in the nest at dawn. The King held up one finger to demand silence, and then a stream of melody poured forth, rising higher and higher, until the sweet notes seemed to reach the very sky.

And the King listened entranced, and unable to stir until the song died away. His

eyes were fixed on the little glimmering light so far above his head.

"Methinks the song came from yonder," he said to his equerry. "I must have that bird, at whatever cost. There is no such nightingale in the whole of my kingdom."

Together they went up to the house. The door was closed, but half hanging from the hinges.

Under his cloak the equerry carried a lantern, and by its light they groped their way up the crazy staircase, passing many closed doors on their way. But no one heard them pass.

Up, up they went, until there were no more stairs to mount, and only one little, dark, closed door confronted them.

The King gently opened it and looked in.

There was a faint light burning, and the little crescent moon shone in at the window.

In a corner was a miserable bed, and on it lay the little beggar girl, tossing about in fever, and ever and again calling to "the Princess" to come and sing her to sleep.

As the King went in, Merle was sitting in the midst of the moonbeams, sobbing because she could not lull the sick child to slumber. All her wonderful hair lay around her in a golden glory, streaming over the grimy floor and making an illumination in the dim light. And the King knew that, after all, *he* had been the one to find the princess in disguise. Then the heaviness of his heart vanished, and he took off his hat and bowed low, saying, "Why are you here amidst such grime and poverty, Princess?"

Merle rose to her feet and, blushing and hanging her head, said, "But, *indeed*, I am not a princess; I, too, am only a beggar girl now, for I have no money left to buy nice


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things to make her well, and I am so afraid she will die. Poor girl, she thought I was a princess because my hair is golden!"

Then Merle sobbed bitterly, for she had grown to love the little beggar girl, and they had lived together happily until the silver coin had all been spent.

The King's face was full of pity as he looked down at the sick child. He beckoned the equerry and told him to hasten to the Court physician and bid him come speedily. He stroked Merle's golden hair, and spoke to her so kindly that her fears fled away

Then the King recollected the nightingale.

"Have you heard the singing of a wonderful bird to-night?" he asked.

Merle shook her head. "I heard no bird," she replied.

"But it seemed to come from here," said the King.

Merle blushed again, and was about to speak when the little beggar girl sat up in bed and held out her thin arms appealingly.

"Sing to me, Princess," she said; "sing me to sleep."

And when Merle began to sing, the King realized the truth. In finding the princess he had found the nightingale too.

When Merle's song was finished, the King stooped and kissed her hand.

"Will you come to the palace and sing to me sometimes?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Merle, simply.

The little beggar girl had fallen into a peaceful sleep at last, and when the great Court physician arrived he pronounced her to be out of danger.

And the little beggar girl lived in prosperity all the rest of her life, while Merle's

golden treasure brought her love and happiness, as her godmother had foretold, for the King made her not only a Princess, but a Queen.

Chapter IV

The King's Bodyguard

THERE was a revolution in the country ruled over by King Ranunculo the Seventh.

The King went in fear of his life; Parliament refused to sit on account of the heat of the weather; no new laws were made, which, after all, did not signify, as none of the old ones were obeyed; everybody did exactly as he chose; the police gave up attempting to keep order and, putting on plain clothes, pretended to be ordinary people. The locksmiths did a roaring trade, for everybody was so afraid of everybody else that each householder had innumerable bolts and bars put upon his dwelling for fear of burglars.

But, despite all these precautions, burglars throve apace and would enter the houses in broad daylight, wearing masks to disguise their features; and no one dared to interfere with them.

The children played about all day, for the schools were closed. It was a lawless time, and all the worry and disorder was due to the carelessness of the King and of the Court goldsmith, who had allowed the crown and scepter to be stolen from his premises. Every year these two articles of value were sent, under a mounted escort, to be cleaned and examined thoroughly, in case any of the priceless gems should be loose in the setting. The Court goldsmith himself received crown and scepter from the hands of the Captain of the Guard, and placed them immediately in a heavily clamped iron safe, of which he and the King alone had keys.

A public holiday was given, which lasted for three days, until the return of the valuables to the palace. The city was a scene of revelry and merriment during that space of time, and at the end the populace followed the King's guard in procession to reclaim the jewels and bear them in triumph back to the palace.

This year, however, the Court goldsmith met them with a story which sent a thrill of wonder through the crowd.

It appears that he had carefully examined the baubles, and had found that two of the rubies in the crown were loose. After attending to this matter, he polished both crown and scepter until they shone with a dazzling splendor such as he had never seen in all his years of office, and then he carefully replaced them in the safe. The key he wore around his neck, attached to a thick gold chain, and it had never left its position.

Just before the arrival of the King's guard he had unlocked the safe, only to find that crown and scepter had vanished from their velvet bed. All this he told the Captain of the Guard, trembling with fear under the soldier's fierce gaze.

"Show me the key, miscreant," the Captain of the Guard thundered in an angry voice. And the little goldsmith drew it forth from the folds of his black velvet doublet.

Yes, there it dangled before the eyes of the assembled multitude—a golden key, emblazoned with a large R. and Seven in brilliants. There was no other key like it in the whole of the kingdom, save the one in the King's own charge.

Putting spurs to his horse, the Captain of the Guard galloped at full speed to the palace, followed by horsemen and populace, helter-skelter. The King was playing a quiet game

of chess with the Queen when they arrived, bringing a cloud of dust with them that caused both their Majesties to sneeze violently.

The King, who had been meditating a most important move, overturned the table by the violence of his sneezing, and was greatly annoyed.

"Tell them to go away," he said, irritably, to the Lord Chamberlain. "Tell them to go away *at once*. My love," he then said to the Queen, "can you remember the position of the chessmen?"

But the Queen, who had had enough of chess for one day, seized her opportunity and was now at the window, looking out at her agitated subjects. "Ranunculo, my dear," she said, growing alarmed, "had you not better inquire the meaning of this tumult at our very doors?"

But the King was still very cross. The game had so *nearly* been his this time—as a rule the Queen won—and the violence of the sneezing had robbed him of his dignity.

"I wish they'd go away," he repeated, replacing two of the pawns on the chessboard. "Are we never to be allowed privacy? Go away! *Go away!*" he exclaimed, opening the window and putting his head out. "*Go away!*"

"My love," expostulated the Queen, "your behavior may excite a revolution. Pray, be calm!"

At the sight of the King the citizens grew uproarious, and all tried to speak at once. Then the Captain of the Guard ordered silence and, riding nearer to the window, broke the terrible news to their Majesties.

There was deep silence for a moment, then the King was seen to totter into a chair, and a hoarse murmur rose from the crowd.

"The key, the key!" they cried.

"Show them the key," said the Queen, who still kept her presence of mind under this ordeal; "show them the key, and then have the Court goldsmith instantly arrested."

The King feebly groped amidst the folds of his velvet and ermine robes. The key was not there. He fell back in his chair and shook his head.

The expectant crowd groaned audibly.

"My love," said the Queen, in an agitated voice, "try to recollect where you last saw it. So much depends upon its being found."

The King thought for a moment, while everybody held their breath; some of the citizens were looking in at the windows, and no one said them nay for their want of respect. They, too, knew how much depended upon the finding of the regalia. Until the crown and scepter were once more safely in the

palace, the public holiday *must* continue, and they all knew what that meant for the country.

Then the King sat upright.

"I had it last evening in the bowling alley," he said; and before the words had left his lips the whole populace had started off at full speed in the direction of the bowling alley, trampling down shrubs and flowers in their mad search for the key. But, needless to say, no key was to be found. A small portion of the royal chain was there, with one bright red ruby dangling from it; but that was all.

From that day the kingdom was given over to misrule. The King and Queen dared not leave the palace, for all their subjects blamed them for the loss of the crown and scepter, and vowed they would obey no King or Queen.

The King gave way to despair, and sat idle and wretched day after day; but the Queen was more sensible, and set her wits to work.

"Now, mark my words, Ranunculo," she said, after thinking deeply for seven days and nights. "It's no use sitting there doing nothing but twiddling your thumbs." But Ranunculo the Seventh only shook his head and groaned in despair.

"I've no heart for *anything*," he replied.

The Queen grew angry, and thought for another seven days and nights.

"I do believe it's the fault of your rascally uncles, the three magicians," she said at the end of that time.

The King's face grew a shade more hopeful.

"They 've played some abominable pranks," he said; "but surely they would n't——"

"Yes, they would," replied the Queen, briskly. "I thought they were up to some fresh mischief when I saw the mountain blazing so brightly. They do n't have a bonfire for nothing. You must offer a reward, Ranunculo!"

"What's the use?" queried the King, wearily. "Nobody'd face them for the biggest reward that was ever offered for their recovery."

"We can try, at least," said the Queen, who was less easily daunted.

The enmity of the people was so great by this time that the King did not dare to admit them to a conference in the Presence Chamber, which was the usual mode of procedure. Yet how was he to acquaint them with the offer of reward?

The Queen again put her wits to work. She procured a huge piece of cardboard, and

upon it she printed in letters of at least a foot in length:

"REWARD! REWARD! REWARD!

"Whereas the Royal Crown and Scepter have been stolen by some person or persons unknown, the sum of——"

The Queen paused and looked at His Majesty inquiringly. "Shall we say seven hundred pounds, Ranunculo?"

The King drummed his fingers upon the window-pane.

"Better make it a thousand," he said, shrugging his shoulders, as if he hoped little from the experiment. "We can raise it by degrees, if that won't induce them to face the magicians."

The Queen went on printing the letters; then she paused again.

'Better advise them where to seek," she said.


WARD!
REWARD!
REWARD!
WHEREAS THE
ROYAL CROWN
& SCEPTRE
HAVE BEEN STOLEN
BY SOME PERSON OR
PERSONS UNKNOWN
THE SUM OF
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"I tell you, it's *no* use," snapped Ranunculo the Seventh. "They've endured enough through my malignant uncles. Why are *my* uncles so much worse than other people's?"

"Foolish regrets won't mend matters," said the Queen, sensibly, beginning to print another letter a foot in length. "They *are* your uncles, and you did n't choose them, so you can't be blamed for owning them. I shall add that we, Ranunculo the Seventh and his Queen, advise the searchers to go in the direction of the mountain, where dwell our uncles, the three magicians. There, that's plain enough for all the world to read." And so it was—the letters might have been read at a great distance.

Then a fresh difficulty arose—how to get it hung out of the palace windows. Of all the Court and retainers, the Lord Chamberlain only remained. Everybody else was idling

with his friends about the town; for no one, of course, was obliged to do any work. The King and Queen had learned to wait on themselves, and the Queen (from sheer necessity) was turning out a first-rate cook.

The Lord Chamberlain was summoned, and with his help they managed to hang the notice from one of the upper windows of the palace. A large crowd immediately assembled, and the King watched them eagerly from behind the curtain.

No one offered to earn the reward.

"I told you so," said the King, gloomily, as the crowd, little by little, melted away.

"We'll offer to double it," said the Queen, briskly; and before long another crowd assembled, and though one or two loitered, as if hesitating, so great was the fear of the three magicians that they, too, in turn departed.

"You'll have to go yourself," said the Queen as night fell and they hauled in the useless poster. "Something *must* be done; and after all, Ranunculo, it was your fault."

"*I* go, indeed!" said His Majesty, scornfully. "*I* face my three uncles! *Not likely!* Increase the reward to fifty thousand."

This was done, but still no one offered, though he sat behind the curtain all next day, and would touch no food in his terrible anxiety.

"You *must* go!" said the Queen. "If you don't, you'll lose your throne altogether. Each day brings us nearer a Republic."

So at last the King consented to go; but he said he must disguise himself in order that his uncles should not know him. Thereupon he donned a very plain brown robe, a turban, and a long white beard, until no one would have known him to be the King. Then they went to the stables to find a horse on which

to ride to the mountain. But not one horse remained. All had been taken by the courtiers.

In a distant stall a donkey stood munching carrots contentedly, not seeming to mind the solitude in the least. The Queen patted the rough neck.

"He will be sure-footed," she said; "and you will run no risk of recognition. They will think you are a peddler with your pack. Dawn will soon break, and now is your safest time to start."

The streets were quite deserted when the King rode along. The watchmen no longer kept watch, the soldiers never mounted guard, the city was left to its own devices. The King sighed heavily at all this disorder, and determined, if possible, to frustrate his uncles' wicked plans; but he wished that some one had been faithful enough to accompany him.

He was out of the town now, and hardly had the wish passed his lips when he saw a very tall young man trudging along the dusty road towards him. Day had dawned, and a rosy light illumined fields and hedges.

The young man drew nearer, and the King saw that he looked weary and travel-stained, and was hardly more than a lad, though his height was very great.

It was Rollo, who had left the Shoe a few weeks earlier, and who so far had only earned enough to supply him with food. For, though good-natured, Rollo was not at all clever, and hitherto had only done rough work on farms. The King was very anxious to have a companion, so he checked his steed.

"Do you want a job, my lad?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Rollo, "I'm going into the town yonder to see if I can earn my breakfast."

"If you come with me, you may perhaps earn thousands of pounds," said the King.

Rollo laughed aloud, thinking this well-to-do peddler meant to make fun of him.

The King drew from his pack a handful of gold. "I mean what I say, and there's something to start with, if you'll enter my service."

Rollo had never seen so much money in his life, and his eyes nearly rolled from his head in astonishment. He agreed to journey on with the peddler, little dreaming that he had really accepted the post of bodyguard to a king. The King looked with delight at Rollo's great strength. Here was some one worth having to help him against the three magicians.

They presently paused at the foot of the mountain and sat down to enjoy the food contained in the pack. As Rollo looked up at the mountain his face grew pale.


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"I wish we were going in another direction," he said.

"Why?" asked the King, curious to know the reason of his fears.

"When I passed along I saw three dreadful-looking men seated round a fire," said Rollo. "Each was gnawing a great bone, and now and then they would throw fresh fuel on the fire that seemed to come out of the top of the mountain. The air was scorching and full of bits of cinder and ashes. I was so frightened I lay down behind a boulder and watched them, and presently one of them took from a sack a wonderful crown all glittering with points of red like the light of dawn."

The King was listening intently.

"Go on!" he commanded.

"He put on the crown and waved in his hand a strange kind of wand set with the

same red lights," continued Rollo, "and then they all looked towards the town and laughed, and their wicked faces shone in the light of the fire."

The King bent forward. "Boy," he said, "that is my crown and my scepter. I am the King of this country; my palace lies yonder. My life and safety depend upon the regaining of those glittering baubles, and the safety of my Queen also."

Rollo never doubted him, he spoke so earnestly, and looked every inch a king.

"They put the things back into the sack and hid it behind a boulder, Your Majesty; let us keep to the far side of the mountain and surprise them. Maybe they are asleep."

Slowly and carefully they wended their way up the mountain, the sure-footed little donkey appearing to realize the danger, too. The air grew hotter, and feathery ashes fell

around them. They covered their mouths to keep the hot fumes from their lungs.

Up they went very cautiously, listening to every sound, not knowing the moment when the three magicians might pounce upon them from behind one of the huge boulders.

Presently Rollo held up his hand for silence and motioned to the King to stand still. Then he climbed a boulder cautiously and looked over it. His face broke into a smile, and he descended once more to the King's side.

"They are asleep," he whispered, "and their faces are fiery red with the heat. The flames are coming out of the mountain close beside them, and they must be in great danger."

"But the sack containing the crown and scepter?" exclaimed the King, anxiously.

"It's under the feet of the biggest ma-

gician," replied Rollo. "I dare not get it, Your Majesty."

Just then a great heap of ashes and cinders came from the top of the mountain, and the King wrung his hands. "At any moment it may be too late," he said, in despairing tones. "I must risk all and go."

But the King was a small man, and Rollo motioned him back. "I will go," he said. "If I fail, do not wait, Your Majesty; it is three to one, but better I than you." He clambered up the boulder and dropped down on the other side, and for a few moments the King stood there with a wildly beating heart; for did not his kingdom, nay, his very life, depend on brave Rollo's success? The next moment he heard Rollo's voice calling, "Fly, Your Majesty—fly for your life! I am coming, too! Do not pause an instant!" And the next moment Rollo appeared running down


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the steep mountain side at full speed, with one of the magicians after him.

The King saw that over his shoulder Rollo carried the sack containing the crown and scepter. The magician, in his fury, was gaining every moment, when just then a strange thing happened. The flames from the burning mountain, as if they had broken bounds at last, flared up towards the sky. With them arose a perfect hurricane of stones and large boulders. The very air grew dark with them, and the King and Rollo lay down, thinking their last hour was come. They heard a terrible cry from the magician, and when the air cleared they saw that one of the boulders had fallen upon him, killing him instantly. The same fate had befallen his brothers, and the country was rid of them forever.

When the tumult had ceased, the King and Rollo rose from the ground, and the

former trembled so violently that Rollo had to support him for a moment. They were both white from head to foot with dust and ashes from the burning mountain, and the King's hair and beard were so singed with the heat that they never fully recovered.

But Ranunculo the Seventh was too happy to care for appearances. He patted Rollo on the back and declared that his fortune was made. Then he poked his head into the sack to see that the crown and scepter were unharmed, and Rollo was dazzled by their magnificence.

They found the good little donkey cropping the short grass as unconcernedly as if nothing unusual had taken place, and the King mounted, setting the sack with its precious contents carefully before him. It was indeed a joyous return! As they neared the city they saw groups of idle citizens

lounging about the street corners not attempting to do any work, their hands in their pockets and their pipes in their mouths—all of them demoralized during the reign of idleness. And again the King's heart rejoiced as he looked at the sack whose contents meant so much to the kingdom.

Now, it is a very certain fact that when people grow idle and discontented they lose their manners after a time. As the King passed along slowly, some of the little street urchins began to run after him, making rude remarks about the peddler and his pack. Of course no one guessed him to be the King. The men, instead of reproving them, laughed and joined in the fun, and one or two even wanted to lay hands on the sack. The King looked round helplessly for the police—but, of course, they were on strike, too. Just as one of the foremost of the crowd put out his hand,

Rollo clutched his alpenstock more firmly and struck him upon the wrist, and the man fell back with a cry of pain. They were nearing the palace gates now, and from one of the upper windows the Queen looked out to see what the hubbub meant.

With her customary presence of mind, she ran with all speed to the entrance gates just as the procession reached them. She opened them sufficiently to allow the King and Rollo to enter, and then she shot the bolts triumphantly in the very face of the disappointed crowd, who saw no reason why they should be shut out while the strangers were admitted. The Queen raised her hands in wonderment and looked inquiringly at the King.

"Yes, we've got them," he said, "all safe and sound; not a scratch on either of them."

But the Queen was not thinking of the

crown jewels; instead of rejoicing, a sob escaped her.

"Oh, Ranunculo!" she exclaimed, "what *have* you done to your hair? It's ruined forever."

"Bless me," said the King, testily, "how can you think of *hair* at such a glorious time as this? What matter if I lost it all, so that the regalia is in safety and the kingdom preserved from ruin? There, there, my dear, cheer up—it will grow again! Of course you were right, as you always are, and my rascally uncles will not trouble us again."

Then Ranunculo placed the crown upon his head, and, handing the scepter to his Queen, led the way into the banqueting hall.

The people could hardly contain themselves for joy when they heard that the crown and scepter were once more safely in the

palace. The magic laid upon them completely disappeared, and everybody returned to his or her duties, full of repentance. The country had never been so peaceful and orderly.

Rollo's simplicity and bravery endeared him to all. No one envied him his good fortune, and he always held the first place in the bodyguard of the King.

Chapter V

The Winter Palace

DESPITE his bravery, little Gyp found his way into the world long and rugged. He had barely realized his weakness until the shelter of the Shoe was lost to him; but he went forward uncomplainingly. His wistful face became a little thinner and more wistful as time went by, and his grasp of his crutches grew less firm; they slipped on the loose stones of the mountain side, and he was always glad when night fell and he could rest, lying on his back in the darkness, looking up at the friendly stars—the same stars that had shone down on the dear old Shoe. He shared his supper with the squirrels and birds, for all wild things

loved Gyp and never feared him. Day by day the weather became colder; winter was approaching, a keen touch of frost was in the air. Gyp used to collect the fallen leaves and make a bed of them to keep himself warm, and there he would huddle until only the tip of his nose was visible.

At last, when he had almost begun to despair, he reached the foot of the mountain. Before him stretched a level green plain, with a stream of water crossing it like a silver ribbon.

The sky was a brilliant blue, the few leaves left on the trees were russet and gold in the sunlight—it seemed hardly possible that winter was at hand. Gyp sat down on the bank of the stream and placed his crutches beside him. The sun's hot rays eased the pain in his back, and he grew more cheerful. The gay piping of a flute came towards him on

the breeze, and he leant upon one elbow to listen.

Nearer and nearer the sound came, now loud, now faint, as the breeze blew it towards him or away—first a few notes like a blackbird at dawn, then a stream of melody like the gurgling of a nightingale in the woods at dusk.

As Gyp looked a curious sight met his gaze. Coming towards him across the plain was a boy not much older than himself, but strong and lusty, blowing his pipe until his cheeks were inflated to twice their usual size. Following the player came hundreds of geese in single file, looking like a long, narrow white ribbon as they waddled across the plain. They were all so solemn and precise that Gyp laughed aloud, and the gooseherd took his pipe away from his mouth and looked at him in astonishment. He stopped, and the geese all stopped in a row, too.

"What's there to laugh at?" asked the gooseherd, in a surly voice.

Gyp had not meant to offend him, and then he saw that tears were standing in the eyes of the gooseherd. "They looked so comical," he explained, in an apologetic voice, "all waddling together and keeping in a straight line. I've never seen such a thing before."

The gooseherd put his pipe to his lips again, but the notes refused to come. Tears began to trickle down his brown cheeks, and he brushed his hand across his eyes as if ashamed of his grief. Gyp thought he must be dreadfully offended, and felt half inclined to cry, too. Then the gooseherd waved his hand, and the geese all waddled away towards the stream. Their master sat down beside Gyp.

"I love every one of them," he said, "and


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they're all going to Mother Goose's kitchen to be plucked for Christmas."

He turned over on his face and sobbed outright, while the geese, unconscious of their approaching fate, all cackled loudly in chorus and fluffed out their snowy plumage. But the leader of them waddled over to his master and thrust his yellow bill under his downcast head. The gooseherd sat up and put his arm round his feathered friend.

"They *shan't* go to be killed!" he said, vehemently. "It's a shame! She shan't have them!"

"Can't we hide them somewhere?" asked Gyp. "They are too nice to be plucked and roasted."

The gooseherd's face brightened.

"I never thought of that," he said. "Perhaps we could hide them until it's too late for the Christmas dinners. But we must

hasten, for Mother Goose's kitchen is at no great distance, and she may send——"

He broke off suddenly, and shaded his eyes with his hand, looking anxiously into the far distance. "Oh, he's coming, he's coming!" he cried. "It's too late!"

Gyp got up and looked, too. Coming towards them was a strange-looking little dwarf, dressed in bright red, with a fantastic pointed cap on his head.

On his feet he had very large brown boots with pointed toes that curled up, and he covered the ground at great speed, seeming almost to fly along. In one hand he held a large spoon, and in the other a great slice of plum-cake.

"It's Mother Goose's head cook," said the little gooseherd, in a whisper, "and that's the spoon he bastes them with. Oh, it's too late, too late!" and he pressed the goose's

head against his arm tremblingly. The dwarf approached still nearer, taking an occasional bite out of his cake. He had a little sharp face, his chin and his nose almost met, while his eyes were like two black beads. He appeared to be in a very bad temper.

"What's the meaning of this delay, I'd like to know?" he demanded, flourishing his basting spoon threateningly towards the little gooseherd. "Here's Mother Goose worrying me out of my life because the last batch are n't up to time, as if it was my fault. What d'ye mean by it, you young rascal?"

He paused, breathless with his exertions, and to Gyp's relief, instead of striking the gooseherd with the spoon, he took a large bite of cake, so large, indeed, that it all disappeared into his very capacious mouth.

"I was resting a little," replied the gooseherd, in a timid voice, "and—and——" He

broke down and turned away, meaning to add that it was the last day, and he could not bear to hasten his flock towards destruction. But his grief overcame him, and he could say no more.

"What's the matter with him?" asked the dwarf, in his squeaky voice, turning to Gyp. "What does he mean by 'and—and?' Can't he speak plainer than that? Never heard such rubbish in my life!"

Gyp, too, felt afraid of the fierce little man, but he tried to explain.

The dwarf interrupted him rudely.

"You're as bad as he is," he said, leaning on the basting spoon, which was nearly as big as himself. "Never came across such a stupid pair of children in my life! Not able to speak at your age! Tut, tut, I 'd be ashamed of myself if I were you! D'ye like my boots?"


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He jerked the words out so suddenly that Gyp nearly dropped one of his crutches.

"They're very—" Gyp paused; he could not truthfully say they were pretty—"very uncommon."

The dwarf's face wrinkled into a gratified smile. He thrust out one large foot and looked at it admiringly.

"They *are* uncommon, are n't they? *Uncommonly* uncommon. Father Christmas did me a good turn when he gave me these last Christmas. Do n't suppose there's a pair to match 'em anywhere."

Gyp thought that a very good thing, but he did not dare to say so. The dwarf turned to the gooseherd.

"Blow your pipe and get 'em together," he said, briskly, and the little gooseherd put his trembling lips to his flute. The geese hastened towards him in ones and twos and

threes, taking up their position in line of march, waddling and cackling to the best of their ability.

The dwarf counted them as they came, keeping time with his basting spoon.

"They do you credit, gooseherd," he said, pompously, "great credit; have n't seen plumper birds this season. They're worthy of the King's larder, and I dare say that's where they'll go."

But such praise only made the little gooseherd more melancholy. He led the way, blowing a sad little air upon his pipe, and the geese followed him in a row.

The dwarf took one or two flying leaps after them, then he noticed that Gyp had not moved.

In his sorrow the little gooseherd had forgotten to say good-bye, and Gyp felt lonely and down-hearted.

Despite his sharp tongue, the dwarf had a very kind heart. He turned and saw Gyp's solitary little figure standing alone. He took two flying leaps back.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, his beady black eyes looking inquisitively at Gyp's crutches. "You'd better not stay here, you know; Mother Goose has been pretty busy, and it's going to snow before long. See how it's darkening over, and the trees will be bare in no time. Look!" He pointed upwards with the basting spoon.

Then Gyp saw that the leaves had fallen in a thick russet shower, and that now only two or three clung to the branches. The sky had clouded over, and all the blue had disappeared; a thin gray mist was overhead. Even as he looked the last leaves fluttered downwards and the first flake of snow floated into his upturned face. Winter had come in ear-

nest. Gyp shivered as he felt its icy breath. Then another flake fell softly, and another and another. The dwarf capered about delightedly.

"There they come," he said, "faster and faster. Mother Goose has begun in real earnest; she'll be up to her eyes in feathers directly. I must be off, or the oven will be getting cool."

Across the plain came the faint sound of the gooseherd's pipe; the long white ribbon of geese became narrower and more narrow, until it seemed no wider than the cotton on a reel.

A flake of snow drifted into Gyp's blue eyes and made his vision dim, and when he looked again the long white thread had disappeared.

"Here they come!" cried the dwarf, trying to catch the flakes in his basting spoon.

"Here they come! See what a hurry they're in, to be sure! You really must be quick, you know, or your teeth will be chattering in no time."

"But I have nowhere to go!" exclaimed Gyp, his lips quivering as he spoke. "I am quite alone."

The dwarf put his finger to his forehead in deep thought and leaned upon his basting spoon. "It's Wish Night," he said, suddenly.

"What's Wish Night?" asked Gyp.

"Do n't know what Wish Night is?" asked the dwarf, in astonishment. "Well, to be sure! What funny, ignorant people there are in the world! It's Wish Night at the Winter Palace, and anybody that's there first gets the biggest wish. You come along with me, and I'll show you the way."

Gyp hobbled after him to the best of his ability. Sometimes the dwarf forgot his com-

panion and went at such a pace that he disappeared in the distance and Gyp completely lost sight of him; then back he would come in his great boots, apologizing for his thoughtlessness.

And as he went, Gyp wondered what his wish should be, and what the Winter Palace would be like, and all kinds of wonderful visions rose before him. But none were half so beautiful as the reality.

In the distance he saw a great arch of light gleaming against the sky. Dusk had fallen, and the stars bespangled the sky with flecks of gold. The Ice Palace shone like silver, and Gyp was half afraid to venture in at the wonderful gateway; but no one was there to say him nay, and when he turned to speak the dwarf had disappeared. Once inside the gateway, Gyp lost his fears. There was so much to look at!

In the center of the courtyard stood a great fir tree, its branches tipped with hoar-frost that gleamed like diamonds in the keen air. On every green twig was an icicle of fantastic shape, and colored candles in frosted silver candlesticks stood among the branches.

But none of the candles were alight. In and out of the doorways darted little elves carrying toys to hang upon the tree, until the branches were weighted down with trumpets and drums, and dolls, and boxes of crackers and bon-bons, and oranges and figs, and every imaginable thing Father Christmas could think of for his boys and girls. And all the little elves looked kindly at Gyp as he stood there leaning upon his crutches in the great courtyard, wondering at all the treasures displayed.

Then, when the tree could hold no more, the doors of the Ice Palace were flung open,

and all the windows were illuminated as if by a magician's wand. The fountains gleamed rosily and whirled delicate wreaths of spray far into the night, while from the distance came the chiming of Christmas bells on the frosty air. The elves had disappeared; Gyp stood alone, looking up at the wonderful tree. Only the splashing of the water in the fountains broke the silence now, for even the chiming of the bells had died away.

Gyp held his breath and felt half afraid of the silence. He had forgotten it was Wish Night at the Winter Palace; he had forgotten everything but the wonderful surroundings and the great fir tree tipped with silver. Then, just as he began to wonder when the candles would be illuminated, the people began to arrive. In they came, hurrying and scurrying, lest they should be too late to gain their wishes. They were all so eager for a front

place that Gyp found himself pushed away into a distant corner, where he could see nothing but the very topmost branch of the fir tree. At the very top was a great star, which seemed to twinkle towards him as if to say, "They're a rough lot, to be sure; but I shan't forget you're there!"

And Gyp straightened himself on his one crutch—for the other had been trodden down in the rush—and took comfort.

He stood patiently in his corner near one of the tall ice columns, wishing that he could have seen the candles lighted on the fir tree. Then suddenly the star twinkled more than ever, and the crowd fell back on either side, and he saw coming towards him an old man in a brown robe with a long white beard and very bright eyes that twinkled in as friendly a manner as the star. Gyp dropped his crutch and held out his hands appealingly. The

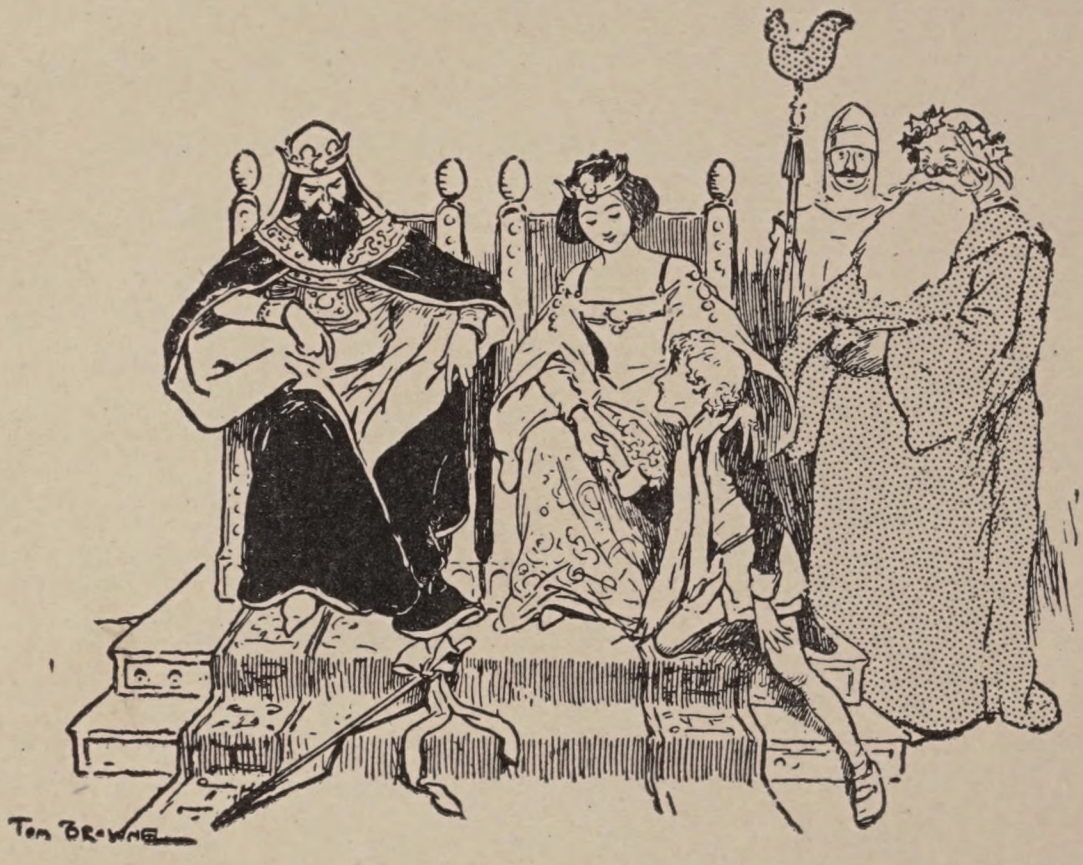
lights danced before his eyes, and he saw the kind face of Father Christmas in a mist.

Father Christmas smiled, and, lifting him up in his arms, carried him to where the King and Queen sat on a raised dais before the tree.

The Queen smiled and made room for Gyp beside her, and held his hand, and Gyp saw that he was in time after all, for not one of the candles was alight.

Then Father Christmas waved his wand and the wick of every candle caught fire and burned with a steady, clear light until the tree was ablaze.

Little Gyp clapped his hands, and everybody grew wild with excitement. Then Father Christmas himself distributed the gifts, and those beyond his reach, right up at the topmost branches, the elves climbed for and gave to him. There were enough and to spare for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every one three times over. No discontented faces were to be seen; all was fun and good-will, and most of them found their wishes gratified.

Then the Queen took Gyp's hand in hers.

"You were here first, little Gyp," she said, "what is your wish?"

The King and Queen, and Father Christmas and the retinue, waited to hear what Gyp would say. He was very happy, but as he looked at the children running and playing about, his eyes grew wistful and he hesitated.

"It is such a very big wish," he said.

"Never mind the size of it," said Father Christmas, briskly; "tell us what it is."

But still Gyp hesitated. The Queen stroked his hair gently.

"Is it anything to do with this?" she asked, stooping and touching very gently Gyp's shabby little shoe with her jeweled hand.

Gyp nodded bravely, though his blue eyes were clouded.

"Yes," he said. "Oh, Your Majesty, if I could *only* run about and play, and never, *never* use my crutches again!"

A sob escaped him, and again the Queen stroked his hair; she was glad that it was Wish Night at the Winter Palace.

"No tears, *if you please*," said Father Christmas, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, and with his wand he pointed upwards to the summit of the fir tree, where the great star blazed steadily. "Bless me! there's another present left hanging up there; I thought the star looked knowing. Up with you, elves, and fetch it to me; I must see for whom it is ticketed."

Two or three of the merry elves climbed the tree, racing to see who could reach the summit first. Up they went, from one spread-

ing green branch to another, until the foremost elf reached the highest branch of all, close beside the star.

Then she clambered down again and danced up to Father Christmas with the present in her hand.

Father Christmas took it from her and then, amidst deep silence, read the label.

"A present for Gyp," he said, and Gyp saw that he held in his hand a little pair of brown leather shoes.

A murmur arose from the crowd.

"The Magic Shoes," they whispered. "He has the best wish of all; then he was here first."

They all watched while Father Christmas put the shoes on Gyp's feet. They fitted perfectly; but Gyp still sat there, not comprehending what it meant.

The Queen rose with a smile and held

out her hand; but still Gyp did not understand. Suddenly the dwarf capered out from a doorway near and flourished his basting spoon above his head.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he said, taking wild leaps into the air. "Come along! You'll be able to keep pace with *me* now."

And, taking Gyp by the hand, he capered up and down the Great Hall, while the crowd looked on and applauded until the din was deafening. The candles burnt with a steady flame, the star at the summit of the fir tree shone with all its might. No one envied little Gyp his good fortune. For, after all, Wish Night at the Winter Palace came only once a year, and to-night Peace and Good-will and Happiness reigned in every heart.